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# Living Alone Together: Barthes, Zola and the Work of Letters

Susan Harrow

In *Comment vivre ensemble: Simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens* (1976-77), the first series of lectures he gave at the Collège de France, Barthes explores individual life lived in a variety of collective situations. At the heart of Barthes's exploration is *idiorrhythmia*, the affective experience of supple, enabling rhythm.<sup>1</sup> Conceived as a median term between aversive forms of loneliness and hyper-integrative forms of collective living (CVE 47), *idiorrhythmia* represents an optimal weigh(t)ing of elements of solitariness and of association. In these lectures, Barthes invites his audience to explore *idiorrhythmia* and its related figures (*traits*) in non-prescriptive and pliant ways and in contexts of their choosing, alert to the fantasmatic potential of everyday situations.<sup>2</sup> Across his fourteen lectures, Barthes engages, intermittently or more insistently with individual narrative works by Proust, Mann, Gide, Zola, and Defoe. Whilst he cites numerous texts of a historical, philosophical or documentary nature, Barthes privileges novels because they reveal “un matériel épars concernant le Vivre-Ensemble (ou le Vivre-Seul)” (CVE 44).<sup>3</sup> Barthes's eclectic choice of primary texts – his “anarchisme des sources” (CVE 44) – offers a model for how researchers might explore *idiorrhythmia* through the work of other creative writers and literary authors, and across a range of genres and media. This article aims to develop such a reading by putting Barthes to work on a corpus that is rarely exploited for its discursive and fantasmatic values – a writer's correspondence. The exploration of the everyday experience of living and working, and the metaphoric freight of that exploration are usually overlooked by

researchers intent on mining literary correspondence for historical “facts” and truth-value. *Comment vivre ensemble* can help us shed light on the occluded subjective experience of the everyday and its fantasmatic construction. Using the values of idiorrhymia and its related *traits*, I set out here to explore the articulation of questions of living individually and living socially in Zola’s early letters, and thus gain a keener sense of why Barthes’s text matters today.

Like Barthes’s *cours*, Émile Zola’s early correspondence (1864-1882) creates a porous space where questions of ethics, ethnography, and the everyday coincide around sites of habitat, habits, exile, food, privacy, domesticity, creativity, and sociability, in ways that anticipate our late-modern fascination with the ordinary and the up-close.<sup>4</sup> Through his letters Zola constructs, fragmentally, a vision of his everyday working utopia, and traces a set of values for others in his cultural community (fellow writers, painters, editors, critics, publishers, and former school friends), non-prescriptively, to share. How does Barthes’s model help us gain a fuller understanding of Zola’s representation of himself as a working writer intent on balancing the quality of privacy conducive to creativity and the pleasures (and pressures) of sociability? And how, in turn, might reading Zola’s correspondence through the figures of *Comment vivre ensemble* enable us to extend and inflect Barthes’s model? These questions inform my approach as I probe the tensions between living individually and living socially (or associatively) through the letters of a canonical French writer who was also a culture critic fantasmatically immersed in the everyday worlds of social groups and individuals. As a novelist to whom Barthes regularly turned (quite literally) as a means to combat his nightly insomnia, Zola is part of Barthes’s proxemics (“proxémie”), the world of things

familiar and close at hand, *proches* in both the spatial and the subjective implications of the word, and a key figure of *Comment vivre ensemble*.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Working affinities***

Early in *Comment vivre ensemble* Barthes speculates on the potential affective contemporaneity of creative thinkers who are active in different historical periods, and concludes with a brief, but far-reaching critique of chronological recuperations and historiographical limit-setting: “De qui est-ce que je suis le contemporain? Avec qui est-ce que je vis? Le calendrier ne répond pas bien” (CVE 36). Thus, Barthes gives himself license – and invites us – to travel across diachronic boundaries and category distinctions. The conceptual and fantasmatic co-existence of two writers writing a century apart offers the potential for a dialogue to develop across differences of historiography (c20th/c19th), medium (published lectures/published letters), and reception. Tracing a set of working affinities between Zola’s writing practice and Barthes’s *cours* around “living alone together” will provide a reasoned base from which to explore the anticipation of key Barthesian *traits* in the discourse of Zola’s early letters, and demonstrate the extendibility of Barthes to other periods and to our reading of genres beyond literary narrative.

First, critical and cultural affinities link the twentieth-century poststructuralist critic and a canonical nineteenth-century novelist who is also a journalist, an art essayist, and an ethnographer, attuned to the discourse and the cultural practices of diverse social groups, both real and fantasized.<sup>6</sup> The scope of the topical interests of Barthes and of Zola within and beyond literature reveals a strong congruence: painting, photography, architecture, desire and intimacy, language, authority, food, politics, subversion, habits

and practices, and the cultural contexts and contents of discourse. Zola's novel-cycle *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire* (1871-93) explores the cultural mythologies of a rapidly modernizing nation (consumerism, technology, work, individuality, community, art, sexuality, celebrity, leisure, fashion, taste). Mythological engagement with the material inventions of modernity links the two writers, as Barthes implies when he evokes the fantasmatic space of Zola's writing in *La Bête humaine* (1890): "[Zola] traite le train sur le mode épique: il le prend dans une mythologie et dans un récit".<sup>7</sup> Congruent sites of cultural enquiry and comparable discursive practices reveal persuasive analogies between the two writers. Thus, where Barthes exposes the inscription of culinary pleasure in Brillat-Savarin's writing ("la grande aventure du plaisir", IV, 809), Zola unfolds an ecstatic multi-sensorial description of the "symphonie des fromages" offered at Les Halles in *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873). Whilst Barthes is speaking of Flaubert when he evokes a nineteenth-century author's "folie du langage" (IV, 1001), he might have said the same of the heteroglossia and frame-breaking experimentalism of *L'Assommoir* (1877) just as he praised Zola's "génie déformant" and the hallucinatory rhythm of *Nana* (1880) (II, 589). Barthes aligns Zola with Proust, Verne, and Stendhal, as a writer of "textes de plaisir" (IV, 243), but he also discerns in Zola's writing a deconstructive socio-cultural critique that contemporary writing (which might imply any or all of the *nouveau roman*, historical narrative, and mainstream fiction) has been unable to sustain: in 1974 he laments, "les romans actuels, même traditionnels, n'ont plus cette espèce d'énergie de témoignage, sur ce qu'on appelle les classes dominantes".<sup>8</sup> Barthes highlights in Zola's fiction the impassioned critique of alienating systems (industry, commerce, political institutions), systems sustained by the

authority culture that Barthes identifies with oppressive “règlement” in *Comment vivre ensemble*. Barthes appreciates the “ethnological temptation” in literary modernity, and the fictional complicity of monumental novel cycles with cultural micro-worlds, as he writes in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975): “[Roland Barthes] a toujours aimé les grandes cosmogonies romanesques (Balzac, Zola, Proust), si proches des petites sociétés. C’est que le livre ethnologique a tous les pouvoirs du roman aimé. C’est une encyclopédie, notant et classant toute la réalité, même la plus futile, la plus sensuelle; cette encyclopédie n’adultère pas l’Autre en le réduisant au Même. [...] l’ethnologique lui apparaît comme le plus proche d’une fiction”.<sup>9</sup> Barthes’s declared affinity with modern literature’s concern for everyday ethnology and ethics has at its very center the motivations and values that inform *Comment vivre ensemble*. These values, as we shall see, can help illuminate the subjective engagement with the culturally proximate and particular that shapes Zola’s early letters. A second broad affinity between Zola in his letters and Barthes in his lectures turns on the voluptuous and penetrating concern of both writers with *how things are* in spaces domestic rather than political. Zola and Barthes share an ethical concern with *how things might be* for individual subjects engaged in affective relations with others in a dispersed community. Inspired by his reading of Jacques Lacarrière’s account of the early fourth-century pre-monastic communities of Mount Athos in *L’Été grec* (1976), Barthes is concerned with how the subject invents itself through everyday negotiations and fantasmatic creations in the socio-cultural domain.<sup>10</sup> Barthes’s terrain in *Comment vivre ensemble* traverses five fantasmatic spaces (*Chambre, Repaire, Désert, Hôtel, Immeuble*). Similarly, Zola’s writerly concern (in his fiction and in his correspondence) is with working practices and domestic spaces, and

with community relations and the preservation of a space of one's own. More markedly than Mallarmé or Flaubert, two of his regular interlocutors, Zola explores, obsessively, questions of personal space and the rhythms of working and living, both on his own account and in his reflections on the situation of his recipients. Many of the formative figures in Barthes's text resonate with Zola's discursive preoccupations in his correspondence. The imbrications of *règle*, *chambre*, *clôture*, and *xéniteia* (to select the most salient figures for my purposes) in Barthes's text can help shed light on Zola's account of his routine practices as an individual subject who participates (through life and through letters) in a diffuse cultural community of fellow writers and artists. Barthes's topics include food, animals, the writer's room, rule and custom (practice), the individual and the group, autarchy (self-sufficiency), and proxemics (the close-at-hand). Zola's immersion in the rhythms of writing, habitat, schedules, workspaces, sociability, and privacy shapes his epistolary discourse, inflecting metaphor and triggering fantasy. Reading Zola's correspondence through Barthes's idiorhythmia can help us explore each writer's concern with the need to balance *vivre seul* and *vivre ensemble*, as a means of achieving existential fulfillment through creative or cultural acts. Working (at writing) depends on cultural interactions and social relations but, concurrent with these, is the individual's pursuit of enabling isolation related to a euphoric vision of enclosure. The envisioning of an everyday utopia is explicit in Zola's letters (in the metaphors of an idyllic retreat that is identified with physical space and with an empathic culture and subjectivity) and in Barthes's *cours* (where it is analogous to Fourier's concept of utopia as a space of both pleasure and pressure (CVE 127)). For Zola, as for Barthes, as we shall

see, the everyday utopia is conjured as a precious and provisional space, a space created and nurtured, and perennially subject to personal, natural, or social contingency.

A third area of affinity turns upon Barthes's rejection of linear, goal-oriented "méthode", and his privileging of Nietzschean "culture" (*paideia*) with its values of suppleness, randomness, open-endedness, and playful freedom (CVE 34). Barthes's practice – his initial conception of "non-méthode" ("trop simple") is revised to "pré-méthode" (CVE 183) – parallels in key respects Zola's circulatory moves in his preparatory project. Barthes's byword for his own practice is "ouvrir un dossier" (CVE 182) and he takes pleasure in creating index cards to this end (*ÆC* IV, 659), just as Zola establishes his *fiches* with headings, key words, information snippets, and sketched responses. Barthes resists, however, the reifying desire to thematize (far less systematize) that is synonymous with textbook Naturalism, and seeks to maximize disorder and randomness in his *fiches* (CVE 52). For all their differences of conception and intention, the writers' processes are broadly cognate: eclectic, serendipitous, digressive, and playful. As Barthes says of Zola's preparatory practice, "[il] se fait un plan de Plassans pour s'expliquer à lui-même son roman. Ces dessins, il le sait, n'ont même pas l'intérêt de placer le discours sous la raison scientifique [...] on joue à la science, on le met dans le tableau, à la façon d'un papier collé".<sup>11</sup> For Barthes (as for Zola), an encyclopedia of modernity is unachievable: the writer can only ever produce an encyclopedia-like *gesture*, a series of moves *towards* completeness (CVE 182). (Flaubert's parody of the "total knowledge" trope in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* had been the subject of Barthes's 1975 seminar at the École Pratique des Hautes Études.)<sup>12</sup> Barthes's vision of "tituber entre des blocs de savoir", which conjures up (for me, at least)



Magritte's "monumental" vision of the risks of reification in *L'Art de la conversation* (1950), applies to Zola whose own encyclopedic gesture towards an *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire* is informed by an intention that is, similarly, relative and circumscribed. Zola's initial plan to write ten novels is expanded to – and definitively limited to – twenty volumes. In *Comment vivre ensemble* Barthes pursues a certain "protocole d'exposition", but if that formulation suggests systematization, his practice rejects hardened "themes" and privileges *traits*, conceived as supple gestures. Barthes's *classement* is alphabetical, which implies resistance to hierarchical, directional or other supplementary value. Instead the reader's potential to digress is pre-inscribed for we may choose not to read the *traits* in alphabetical order, but to explore the figures cursorily and recursively across the text. On a markedly different scale, a similarly pliant practice is encouraged in Zola's monumental ten-volume correspondence, which most readers will seek only to explore fragmentally and in discontinuous, non-consecutive ways.<sup>13</sup> Together, the alphabetical ordering of Barthes's thirty *traits* and the chronological sequencing of Zola's correspondence (any edited correspondence, for that matter) might appear systematic but, in practice, each in its own way invites us to engage in serendipitous, non-linear, freewheeling discovery. The movement of Barthes's reflections and of Zola's epistolary preoccupations is punctuated by digressions and returns, echoes and reprises of desires and values. Each writer is engaged in a fluid form of travelling as he explores values of distance and reclusion, conviviality and solitariness, creativity and pleasure. This supple practice connects Barthes and Zola through the *cours* and the correspondence and, by extension, fiction-writing itself. In the fantasmatic space of Zola's novels his protagonists eschew linear, methodical approaches, developing

instead disjunctive or transformative “cultural” responses to their environments and life events: one thinks of the boundary-breaking practices of Zola’s fictional Renée Saccard (*La Curée*), Gervaise Macquart (*L’Assommoir*) and Nana (*Nana*).<sup>14</sup> As they challenge and rework values of social class, inheritance, habit, locale, gender, sexuality, law, and territory, shape-shifting fictional characters inflict a puncture or a wound in the smooth narrative flesh of Naturalist predictability.

A fourth area of affinity concerns communication. Notwithstanding differences of medium and message, communicating through letters or through lectures is an individual activity pursued in dialogue with others in the cultural community. Zola’s cultural community in the epistolarium, as in “real life”, includes Flaubert, Mallarmé, Manet, Huysmans, Antony Valabrègue, Paul Alexis, Edmond Goncourt, Nadar, Turgenev, and Daudet. When they exchange letters or come to visit and to share ideas around Zola’s desk or dining table, a sense of international community and interdisciplinary reach balances the solitariness of living and working in (relative) isolation. Barthes’s cultural community is formed by a large, hybrid audience (students, retired people, academics, and the culturally inquisitive) participating (in a strong sense, he hopes at the outset) in his course at the Collège de France: “pour qu’il y ait une relation d’enseignement qui marche il faut que celui qui parle en sache à peine un peu plus que celui qui écoute (parfois même, sur certains points, moins: ce sont des va-et-vient). Recherche, et non Leçon.” (*CVE* 53).<sup>15</sup> *Comment vivre ensemble* (in its oral version and its definitive published form) and Zola’s edited letters create a dialogic space where the lecturer and the letter-writer reach out to a circle of receptive interlocutors – a cultural, creative and

intellectual community – whom they encourage to develop their own idiorrhythmic values.

Barthes invites his Collège de France audience to share their responses and their suggestions at the end of every lecture. These he feeds back the following week, using the metaphor of letter writing with its suggestions of receptivity and responsiveness (“une sorte de courrier des auditeurs”, *CVE* 57). We gain a partial view of audience contributions in the liminal notes accompanying a given lecture (“Séance du 2 mars 1977. Roman de l’idiorrhythmie: on me signale: Giono: *Que ma joie demeure*”, *CVE* 93). Likewise in Zola’s letters, through their content, we *hear* Zola responding to his correspondents’ specific concerns (about how to work, how to write, how to make optimal use of time). In both Barthes’s and Zola’s writing, we enter a space of sociability built on the *recognition* of shared values and affective reciprocities. Zola, reaching out to his interlocutors, explores how individual creativity can be nurtured in a variety of cultural contexts and social interactions (at work, at home, on vacation); Barthes shares with his audience his fascination with how individual freedom – a space of one’s own – can be sustained relative to collective and affective pressures (instanced, *inter alia*, by the sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain*, the recluse’s bedroom in *La Séquestrée de Poitiers*, and the island sanctuary in *Robinson Crusoe*). Each audience, in its ethos and its actual or projected fantasmatic work, contributes to *autarchie*, the self-sufficiency of a group founded on broadly shared values (*CVE* 84). In the event, readers of *Comment vivre ensemble* have Barthes’s project, but far less of the audience’s response than Barthes had wished. His original plan for a final session devoted to the practical construction of “une utopie du Vivre-Ensemble idiorrhythmique” (*CVE* 177), with the active input of his

audience (“fournir vous-mêmes des éléments, des bribes, des débris de figuration”) is aborted principally because utopias in history are social structures and Barthes’s vision of an idiorrhythmic utopia of Living Together is not social in nature. Rather, Barthes articulates his desire, unfulfilled in *Comment vivre ensemble*, to explore the quality of a specifically “domestic” utopia (“le Souverain Bien”, *CVE* 177). By putting to work Barthes’s *traits* we will begin to discern a domestic utopia in the discourse around working and living in Zola’s early letters.

### ***Travelling around idiorrhythmia***

Barthes envisions *idiorrythmie* as freedom of flow, self-modulated pace and place, and responsive suppleness. *Idiorrythmie* is achieved via the flexibility of “règle” (a set of freely developed, self-authored practices), a counter to the constraints of “règlement” (authority imposed on the individual by external forces and power structures) (*CVE* 69). Barthes fantasizes a strict delineation between the “enfer du règlement” and the “aristocratie et paradis de jouissance de la règle” (*CVE* 165). “Règle” represents a culture of pliancy, characteristic of an ethical structure or space shaped by individual desire and potential, and motivated by the urge to “donner à la vie, à la quotidienneté, une transparence” (*CVE* 164). Barthes’s text charts the oscillation between aversive “règlement” and meliorative “règle”, and can thus help us to expose analogous sets of competing values in Zola’s early correspondence, and, in the process, bring to light some proto-Barthesian equivocations.

Synonymous for Barthes with authority and constraint, *règlement* (regulation) in an advanced society describes a prescriptive regime where the cadences of work are

determined by others. Barthes's *règlement* sheds light on Zola's early experience of waged labor at the Hachette publishing house. Working according to the rhythms imposed by an employer is inimical to the longed-for freedom to work on one's own account ("travailler pour moi").<sup>16</sup> Just as Barthes evokes the profound disturbance caused by conflicting rhythms in the intimate relation of mother and child (*CVE* 40, n.33), so Zola identifies the imbalance that blights his experience of multi-tasking. "J'ai entrepris une telle besogne", he writes as he contemplates his roles of paid employee (on ten-hour daily shifts at Hachette), working journalist (he is contracted to write for *Le Petit Journal* and *Le Salut public*), and emerging novelist (his embryonic novel *La Confession de Claude* is languishing in a drawer).

If the negative associations of *règlement* dominate in Barthes's lectures, Zola's letters reveal a degree of equivocation and transformability that invite us to nuance Barthes's model (*CVE* 164). Zola describes how the conditions imposed at Hachette spur a strategy of subversion where the explorative potential of the imagination allows the employee to escape constraining office-work. He explains how his tactic involves an imaginary splitting of the self whereby the body performs the ascribed functions of the job whilst the creative mind explores a space of pleasure and fantasmatic transcendence ("vivre en pensée où il me plâirait [...] au-delà des mers [...] au-delà des étoiles; ce qui me permet de n'être presque jamais à mon bureau").<sup>17</sup> There is a productive paradox here, where the experience of *règlement* provokes – of itself – a response conducive to imaginative activity: alienation in the workplace becomes a precondition of fantasmatic liberation. The discursive imbrication of values of oppressive regulation (in salaried employment) and of liberating individual practice (through fantasy) is discernible in

Zola's letters in ways that anticipate, less Barthes in this respect, than the subversive ruses and tactics explored by Michel de Certeau in *L'Invention du quotidien: Arts de faire* (1980) where individuals invent their own empowering *art de vivre* from *within* a situation of constraint.

Working independently through the creation of rhythms is affirmative of a sense of personal and creative agency that is extendible to others. Zola describes to his fellow writers his everyday practices, which are founded on an enabling use of time and the creation of conducive work spaces. His freely chosen and carefully nurtured practices offer a model of sustainable working that is commensurate with Barthes's *règle* ("un système d'habitudes" (CVE 163)). Writing to Paul Alexis in July 1871, Zola outlines his credo: 'je n'ai foi que dans le travail et dans la production' (*Corr.*, II, 291). Zola advises his younger *confrère*: "Travaillez à votre aise, mais sans perdre une minute". Through lexical and syntactic choices that anticipate the tensions of Barthesian idiorrhymia, Zola articulates thus the precarious balance of easefulness and enabling *règle* that he offers to others (his intended recipients and, also, us, his present-day readers) so that they, in turn, might develop their own sustainable culture of working at writing. Ethical values are thus formed in the dialogic space of correspondence, making the *epistolarium* the supple and empowering space that Barthes identifies with "une Éthique" (CVE 184) founded on reaching out to others with whom the writing subject envisions a relationship of mutuality and understanding.

Self-regulated practices and habits define the individual's experience of the everyday, and have an optimally transparent relationship to time. The practice of work as a self-regulated, time-transparent routine is instanced by the motto inscribed over the

hearth in Zola's study: *nulla dies sine linea*. Modernity's protocols for the management of production are once again adapted by the writer, and the conceptual and experiential distance between *règlement* and *règle* diminishes as the notional contract of the writer with himself is made legible (readable and conceived as a law (*règle*) that the writer sets for himself).<sup>18</sup> Zola's practice in this respect correlates with Barthes's suggestion that *règle* has the propensity to conceal and repeat aspects of *règlement* (but not the reverse): "pensée critique que toute règle contient en germe un règlement, que toute coutume est une forme déguisée de loi" (CVE 165).

Humor is a way of sharing these values in the dialogic space of Zola's correspondence, as it is in Barthes's *cours*. With playful irony Zola extols working in a bourgeois way: he produces three pages a day, seated at his desk like a grocer at his counter (Corr., II, 438). Thus, Zola deploys a fantasy that articulates his sense of his own self-devised rhythms (*règle*) and that echo – earnestly or ironically – with the memory of *règlement* and commercial work culture. He claims that his writing routine is "extraordinairement ordinaire", the oxymoron staging values of simplicity, modesty and unremitting dedication, and suggesting a parallel with Barthes's alternately serious and self-debunking account of his own everyday working practice in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* ("Emploi du temps").<sup>19</sup> By foregrounding and fantasizing the repetitious ordinariness of their practices, Barthes and Zola stage their rejection of hieratical self-positioning, and articulate their sense of exploring subjectivities that are more open and empathic to the lived experience of their audience and readership.

At the heart of Zola's epistolary reflections on the ethical values of assiduousness is "besogne", a concept-term that originates with the imposition of a work culture at

Hachette (“règlement”), as we saw above. That concept–term then quickly crosses over into Zola’s assessment of his everyday experience as a writer, the culture of industriousness that is freely chosen (“règle”). *Besogne* is a work value that journeys from the instrumentalist imperatives of waged labor to the creative autonomy of the writer who regulates his output according to his own rhythms. *Besogne* attracts related metaphorical freight where Zola identifies with the creative grafters and encourages others to work assiduously at their writing. “Piochez dur”, he urges Flaubert in a letter of 1877, the metaphorical activity around the concept of “working hard” evincing an empathic response both to the arduous conditions of lower-class labor and to the intellectual efforts of literary associates. The persona of *homo faber* emerging in Zola’s letters is the fantasmatic embodiment of an ethos of applied effort and painstaking progress: “j’ai plusieurs livres sur le chantier qu’il me faut finir (*La Curée* etc.)” (*Corr.*, II, 283). Subjectivity is formed not in solipsistic genius but in writerly craft and, especially, in the values of “hard graft” shared in the wider cultural community. Zola’s discourse around craft and graft can be explained and contextualized with reference to the early work of Barthes. In 1953, in *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* (“L’Artisanat du style”), Barthes discerns, from the mid-nineteenth century, a shift from the “writer as genius” trope to the “writer as craftsman”, a development he identifies with Gautier, Flaubert, Gide, and Valéry:

Vers 1850 il commence à se poser à la Littérature un problème de justification :  
 [...] toute une classe d’écrivains soucieux d’assumer la responsabilité de la  
 tradition va substituer à la valeur-usage de l’écriture, une valeur-travail. L’écriture  
 sera sauvée non pas en vertu de sa destination, mais grâce au travail qu’elle aura



coûté. Alors commence à s'élaborer une imagerie de l'écrivain-artisan qui s'enferme dans un lieu légendaire, comme un ouvrier en chambre et dégrossit, taille, polit et sertit sa forme, [...], passant à ce travail des heures régulières de solitude et d'effort. (*CE* I, 209)

By virtue of their emphasis on the individual writer immersed in a space of his own ("Flaubert (rôdant ses phrases à Croisset), Valéry (dans sa chambre au petit matin)"), Barthes's reflections can help illuminate the practice of Zola ensconced in work at his own legendary place, his house at Médan, downstream from Paris. Barthes's evocation, in 1953, of the work culture of modern writers, pursued in a place of beneficial retreat looks ahead to the formative values of *Comment vivre ensemble* and the unfulfilled project of a domestic utopia.

Idiorrhythmic values are experienced in the pleasurable constancy of everyday practices. The same holds true for fictional spaces: Barthes's delight in reading *Robinson Crusoe* derives from those tracts of narrative where "nothing" happens (*CVE* 123). When the rhythms of living and working (and reading) are disrupted by "events" and external contingencies, pleasure is abruptly curtailed. In his letters Zola describes the current (and recurrent) state of things, and reflects on the contingencies (physical, political, affective) that upset his sense of quotidian constancy. Thus, history (the Franco-Prussian War) derails the everyday experience of the writer: "cette affreuse guerre m'a fait tomber la plume des mains", he writes to Edmond Goncourt in August 1870 (*Corr.*, II, 223). Meteorological extremes (snow, flooding) and material conditions (house renovation) jeopardize everyday practices, as do affective "happenings", from minor domestic

inconveniences to life-changing personal events (erotic desire, family illness, bereavement, mourning).<sup>20</sup> Immersed in depression following the deaths of his mother and of Flaubert in 1880, Zola writes to Henry Céard describing a form of beneficent *règle* founded on values affective and pragmatic, subjective and collective, kinetic and creative, metric and architectural: “j’avance avec ma lenteur accoutumée, trois pages par jour et cinq jours seulement par semaine, sans compter les tuiles. Vous vous plaignez de ne pas aller vite. Vous voyez que les camarades en sont tous là. C’est la continuité de l’effort qui fait les gros monuments” (*Corr.*, IV, 199). To enter the writer’s epistolarium, guided by Barthes’s *Comment vivre ensemble*, is to immerse in a generative and generous fiction where the ethics of working and living “alone together” implies a constant reaching out from the autobiographical “I” to others that draws empathic interlocutors (correspondents, listeners, readers) in dialogic reflection. Ethical values shape the correspondence: Zola offers his own values and practices as a model to empower younger writers, just as, similarly, Barthes nurtures the hope that his audience might develop their own fantasmatic work in response to the values explored in his *cours* (“favoriser le travail projectif d’une œuvre, d’un discours, d’un cours ”, *CVE* 177).

In Zola’s letters, an ethos of routine working and its regular recompense echoes modernity’s reward system, implying once more a closer relationship between empowering *règle* and constraining *règlement* than Barthes’s contrastive discussion suggests. The writer’s leisure must be earned so a game of dominoes is enjoyed specifically as a reward for a productive day’s work (“quand je suis content de ma journée” (*Corr.*, II, 437-39)). Digression and play – implying the making and the breaking of schedules and plans – represent utopia for Barthes. Work, if it is to be

effective, demands the alternative rhythms of restorative relaxation. Thus, for Zola gardening is a “distraction hygiénique” (in the words of Paul Alexis), alongside photography, cycling, and music enjoyed in the company of friends and family. One of the strongest affinities between Barthes and Zola emerges in each writer’s preoccupation with the balance between privacy and sociability, between *vivre seul* and *vivre ensemble* as a means of achieving existential fulfillment through creative or cultural acts.<sup>21</sup> A space of one’s own is also, intermittently, a space of sociability and hospitality.

Barthes’s vision of idiorrhythmic harmony where living alone is balanced by refreshing interruptions (“Quelque chose comme une solitude interrompue d’une façon réglée”, *CVE* 37) makes us alert to how Zola nurtures his writerly privacy whilst relishing sociability (in the form of dinners, regular visits, impromptu calling, musical parties, regular correspondence, and the creation of the collective short-story project *Les Soirées de Médan* (1880)). At the same time, *l’art de vivre* has to be balanced by the imperatives of *l’art de travailler*. Food taken with friends thus represents a restorative digression from work and the stuff of sociability, but any excess may impede creativity. Barthes, echoing Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie du goût* (1825), underscores the short-lived “surdétermination des plaisirs” that is an initial effect of conviviality (*CVE* 152), and highlights the risks of the “communion extatique” that tips over into orgiastic excess (“le propre d’une orgie est de ne pas se mesurer”, *CVE* 152). Barthes helps us to discern, in Zola, similar concerns about disruptive excess and the recognition of a “tipping point” when he receives an invitation to dinner from Turgenev in May 1876. Stirred by the fantasm of bodily breakdown, a playful Zola urges his Russian *confrère* to respect the values of creative, corporeal and culinary balance, lest the momentum of literary work be

disrupted: “pas un dîner énorme, par grâce! Autrement j’écarterais, et je ne puis travailler de trois jours” (*Corr.*, II, 452).

### *Space, place, and habitat*

The formative desire to escape external pressures gives rise to one of the central figures of Barthes’s exposition: *anachôrêsis* (chosen exile, refuge, retreat). In a secular context this takes diverse forms: establishing a sanctuary within the urban space; retreating to the country; vacationing; and, at a micro-level, creating a room of one’s own within the shared habitat. Barthes’s text alerts us to the values of refuge and enclosure that describe ideal individual living in his chosen texts, and thus helps us discern similar values in the metaphors of Zola’s correspondence. For Zola, ending his status as a salaried worker meant that he could “s’enfermer” to write novels, the obsession with pleasurable self-sequestering in the domestic space recurring throughout his early letters.<sup>22</sup> This connects with the privileging of interior space and inwardness – ‘l’espace du quant-à-soi’ (*CVE*, 89) – that supports the experience of self-determined exile and euphoric enclosure (*clôture*).<sup>23</sup>

The dream of authoring one’s own space is developed on an ambitious scale where fantasy finds material translation in Zola’s creation, from 1878, of his rural retreat at Médan. In his reflections on living and working there, Zola’s discourse resonates with values that can be framed through Barthes’s concept of an everyday utopia based on preserving a distance from forces likely to constrain and monopolize. More than this, Zola’s letters allow us to discern the outline of a form of Barthesian domestic utopia based on the beneficial values of habitat and “habiter”. Zola’s fantasy turns on the escape

from the metropolis, and the ecstatic (and, he assures his reader, very affordable) embrace of nature and seclusion. Médan is “un paradis de verdure”, he rhapsodizes to Marius Roux in July 1878 (*Corr.*, III, 189). Writing to Flaubert a month later, he describes Médan as “un modeste asile champêtre” and continues: “[j]’ai trouvé une] cabane à lapins, dans un trou charmant, au bord de la Seine; neuf mille francs. Loin de toute station, [pas un] seul bourgeois, je suis seul, absolument seul” (*Corr.*, III, 201). “Seul, absolument seul” conjures up the enclosure fantasy that Barthes identifies *inter alia* with anchorite communities and monastic orders including Carthusians (*CVE* 100-03). The material and affective reality relates more, however, to a “living alone together” context where creativity, sociability, individuality, family values, and libidinal pressures co-exist (in the form of his wife, his staff, his domestic animals, and his occasional staying guests, and, after 1888, his lover and their two children living *à proximité*, a form of physical, affective, and erotic proxemics).

In a secular context and in ways that resonate with Barthes’s reference to the Carthusian tradition of living alone with occasional social or collective interruptions (*CVE* 101-03), Zola indulges his own monastic fantasy, one that is lightened by self-debunking humor: ‘je mène ici une vie de chartreux, un chartreux, il est vrai, très embêté par les maçons, serruriers, et les peintres’ (*Corr.*, III, 354-55). When his home is almost cut off by rising water in December 1882, the novelist articulates his pleasurable sense of isolation and fantasizes about the apocalypse from which his elective reclusion offers absolute refuge: ‘ici, je suis au bout du monde, sans nouvelles des vivants. [...] je suis tellement enfoncé dans la fin de mon roman, que rien ne me touche des cataclysmes de la terre’ (*Corr.*, IV, 349-50).

In Zola's epistolary discourse an anthropomorphic vision unfolds. Zola identifies his Médan retreat increasingly and explicitly with his fictional work: he christens the Square Tower (added in 1879) "Nana", identifying his working–living space with his eponymous courtesan heroine, and with the material realization of a fantasy ("ma tour, une toquade", *Corr.*, III, 228). Barthes's notion of "simulations romanesques" takes wing here in Zola's merging of empirical and fictional worlds. The space of Zola's vast *cabinet de travail*, occupying the tower's top floor, can be approached via Barthes's figure of (real and imaginary) suspended space (*OE* IV, 502) – a space at once connected and separate, the architectural and fantasmatic conjunction of *vivre seul* and *vivre ensemble* – as a site of idiorrhymic pleasure. Retreat from the social mainstream implies, for Barthes, the creation of a *cella*, a space within a space (typically, a study within a house), in which to develop fantasy and thus nurture subjectivity (and, crucially, separate from the private room of the conjugal couple). The writer's study is a structured, transportable space with its functional elements (worktable, desk, bookshelves, lamp) that facilitate and represent the activity of the individual thinker (*CVE* 89). The original fantasy construction of an analogous Zolian *cella* is Manet's 1868 (studio) portrait of the author captured "at his desk", surrounded (and defined) by the tools of his craft and the simulacra of key cultural references. This portrait of "Zola at work", based on a mocked-up desk in the painter's studio, is a powerful example of Barthes's *proxémie* ("l'espace très restreint qui entoure immédiatement le sujet [...] espace du regard familier, des objets que l'on peut atteindre avec le bras, [...] espace privilégié du sommeil, du repos, du travail sédentaire chez soi", *CVE* 155). The iconography of Manet's painting constructs the fantasized micro-space of his subject and the culture of what is prized and

proximate in visual and tactile terms: the writing-table; the materials of work (pens, inkwell); and the influences (Spanish art, Manet's modernism, *japonisme*) shaping Zola's work. Here we can extend Barthes's proxemics, a cultural *trait*, to Zola's aesthetics and style *beyond* his correspondence. Zola's literary concern with the up-close and the particular of each cultural and social context, with the material thickness of everyday (fictional) lives, and with the haptic fantasy developed by the de-naturalizing "Naturalist" novel makes Barthesian proxemics a compelling figure for understanding the pressure points of writerly craft and readerly pleasure in Zola.

### ***Working away***

Whether at home or on vacation, the writer works to create a space of his own. His project begins with a gesture of self-exile (*xéniteia*), the occupation of a space within a space, and a repeated move to enclosure: this conjures up for Barthes the island fantasy of *Robinson Crusoe* (CVE 94, 96).

Vacations afford a short-term voluntary exile, an ideal conjunction of values of productive creativity and restorative pleasure, for Zola, as for Barthes: they integrate the values of "dépaysement" and respond to the need to achieve a form of idiorrhythmic balance between leisure and work. This feature is insistently marked in the discourse of the novelist's early "postcard" letters. Here Zola evokes his legendary "paresse travailleuse", an oxymoron that captures the competing impulses at the heart of his ethos of writing and living.<sup>24</sup> Prompted by the need to rest in order to be more productive (the instrumental telos resurfaces here), working holidays are the site where *art de vivre* and *art de travailler* may, in practice, prove difficult to reconcile. Writing from the

Normandy coast in August 1875 to Marius Roux (*Corr.*, II, 405), Zola complains of the poorly furnished vacation accommodation that forces him to write on the cramped corner of a table. Beyond the constraints of inadequate proxemics, the desire to work is thwarted by the irresistible temptations of shrimp netting and sea bathing (*Corr.*, II, 406), an indication of the perils of imbalance. A more successful idiorrhhythmic equilibrium in the Barthesian sense is achieved in summer 1877 when Zola exchanges Paris for Provence in order to begin work on *Une page d'amour* (*Corr.*, III, 68). Zola evokes the rhythm of his working holiday:

Je m'enferme [...] dans l'Estaque et je travaille. [...] je me suis mis bravement à mon roman et j'ai déjà abattu deux chapitres. [...] le pays est superbe. [...] Depuis quinze jours nous prenons des bains et notre santé est en somme excellente. Je me nourris de coquillages, ce qui rend les idées légères. (*Corr.*, III, 68)

As he extols an invigorating mixture of hard work and hospitality, creativity and sensuous pleasure, Zola outlines an experience of idiorrhhythmia in a Mediterranean context that is analogous to Barthes's fantasized experience of the Midi in *Comment vivre ensemble*. Inspired by the Mount Athos of Lacarrière's *L'Été grec*, Barthes unfolds his own "pure" Mediterranean fantasy in terms of sea, simplicity, and the harmonious conjunction of sociability and privacy: "je me vois là, au bord d'une terrasse, la mer au loin, le crépi blanc, disposant de deux chambres à moi et autant pour quelques amis [...]" *Fantasme très pur qui fait abstraction des difficultés qui vont se lever comme des fantômes*" (CVE 37). Linking Zola and Barthes in these two Mediterranean fantasies –



beyond the productive pleasure of living alone together – is the idea of achieving a certain lightness of being and of thinking (“[rendre] les idées légères” / “[faire abstraction] des difficultés”).

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This article has explored some of the ways in which Barthes and Zola might *live together* in co-existing, non-contemporary dialogic spaces where the values of ethnography, ethics, and the everyday traverse the boundaries of critical thought and literary correspondence, and the limits of century. Based on the example of Zola’s early letters, what are the implications of Barthes’s *Comment vivre ensemble* for reading literary correspondence, and how might epistolary writing help us develop and inflect applied approaches to Barthes?

Barthesian idiorrhymia and its related *traits* help us open up the discursive space of everyday living that is ordinarily by-passed by readers of literary correspondence in pursuit of “factual” answers to historiographical queries. Reading Zola’s correspondence through Barthes’s *Comment vivre ensemble* has implications for how, across our disciplines, we might explore epistolary writing more deeply, alert to its metaphoric freight and its fantasmatic capacity. Epistolary writing is, as Barthes’s figures help us reveal in the case of Zola, a space of self-invention where the resources of discourse (metaphor, analogy, irony, humor) allow the letter-writer’s fantasy to take wing. The prism of *Comment vivre ensemble* reveals the subjectivity of the writer as he

appraises his practices of working and living, as he articulates his desire for a healthy equilibrium between solitary occupation and collective exchange, as he explores his material world and transforms it fantasmatically, and as he shares with his interlocutors – both the intended recipients and his late-coming, twenty-first-century readers – his cultural values of living and working at writing. Barthes's exploration of beneficial rhythms and the forces that undermine them, and his constant crossing of the divide between individual and shared experience, alert us to the ethical values enfolded in a process that reaches beyond the potential solipsism of lecture-giving or letter-writing to communicate and share values with audiences contemporary and future. Through the exploration of exile and utopia, individuality and sociability, habits and digressions in *Comment vivre ensemble*, Barthes spurs us to reflect on the everyday question of what it is to live as a writer, on the spatial dimension of work, on its social or private setting, and on its fantasmatic constraints and its pleasures. Specifically, Barthesian idiorrhythmia allows us to discern the ethos of salutary solitariness and supportive association articulated in Zola's correspondence, and to identify the precarious balance that is the defining object of desire for Zola, as for Barthes. The text of the correspondence, like that of Barthes's *cours*, has a heuristic value for the circle of receptive interlocutors to whom it was addressed, and for readers today. A constellation of ethical and cultural values around the figuring of space, time, privacy, and community connects, in profound ways, Zola's early correspondence and Barthes's late *cours*, separated by a century and related through their deep engagement with the fragile utopia of living alone together.

The implications of Zola's letters for inflecting Barthes's *Comment vivre ensemble* appears, on the face of it, a harder question to answer. Exploring the topic of a

writer's working practice through the figures of *Comment vivre ensemble* takes Barthes's late thinking in a fresh direction and opens up genre possibilities beyond the zones of narrative fiction, history, and documentary that are favored by Barthes in his lectures: that much is certain. Zola's correspondence is a nexus of the corporeal, spatial, temporal values, individual and community values explored in the *cours*, a discovery that alerts us to the wider scope of *Comment vivre ensemble* in applied contexts. Immersing in the folds and fractures of Zola's epistolary discourse has led us to nuance the contrastive discussion Barthes makes of "règlement" and "règle", a move that responds to the quality of suppleness at the heart of Barthes's *pré-méthode*. Reading Zola through Barthes has, moreover, exposed something of the potential for extending Barthes's cultural *traits* to aesthetic values and to creative style; that is, to those questions of textuality that lie beyond the explicit remit of Barthes's *cours* but are integral to his life's work. Barthes matters here, too, for his example stirs us to reflect on what he leaves undone and to begin to develop our own itineraries inspired by his.

In contrast with *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, *Le Plaisir du texte*, *Mythologies*, *Camera Lucida*, or *S/Z*, *Comment vivre ensemble* remains relatively undiscovered by the academy. Reading Zola's epistolary everyday through this profoundly humane work reveals the promising extendibility of Barthes's later reflections to multiple genres and cultures, and across a range of twenty-first-century disciplines.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Comment vivre ensemble: Simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens*, Claude Coste, ed., (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2002). Subsequent references to *Comment*

*vivre ensemble* take the form *CVE* followed by page number(s). References to Barthes's *Oeuvres complètes I, 1942–1961, II, 1962–1967, and IV, 1972–1976*, Éric Marty, ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1993), are abbreviated as *OEC* followed by volume and page number(s).

<sup>2</sup> Whilst most commentators favor “figures” as a translation, depending on context and inflection, *traits* may also evoke “sites”, “keywords”, “values”, “gestures”, “actions”, and “practices”.

<sup>3</sup> Barthes test the variables of “living alone” and “living together” through selected literary and historical examples, from Gide's *fait divers*-inspired tale of the *séquestrée* of Poitiers, Mann's sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain*, Robinson Crusoe's island in *Treasure Island*, Palladius's *Lausiac History*, tante Léonie's bedroom in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and Zola's bourgeois apartment block in *Pot-Bouille*. Zola's 1882 novel is discussed intermittently by Barthes as an example of “vivre ensemble”.

<sup>4</sup> Zola's correspondence looks ahead to twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary and methodological concerns with the everyday as a site of narrative creativity (Proust, *écriture féminine*, auto-fiction) and a space of intense cultural and theoretical enquiry (Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Barthes).

<sup>5</sup> In *Le Plaisir du texte*, Barthes evokes the sleep-inducing quality of subjecting Zola's novels to “slow reading” (*OEC* IV, 217-61 (225)). In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, the narrator describes his bedside reading, which includes crime novels, “old-fashioned” English novels, and Zola (*OEC* IV, 575-772 (659)).

<sup>6</sup> Zola's notebooks and accompanying drawings reveal the documentary work of a cultural historian of social practices and discourses (in *Émile Zola, Carnets d'enquêtes. Une ethnographie inédite de la France*, Henri Mitterand, ed. (Paris: Plon, coll. “Terre humaine”, 1987)).

<sup>7</sup> *OEC* IV, 976-79 (976).

<sup>8</sup> In “Où / ou va la littérature”, a conversation with Maurice Nadeau in 1974 (*OEC* IV, 547-63 (557)).

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<sup>9</sup> *ÆC* IV, 575-772 (661).

<sup>10</sup> See Patrick ffrench, “How to live with Roland Barthes”, *SubStance*, 2009, issue 120 (113-24) and Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 201-07.

<sup>11</sup> *ÆC* IV, 677.

<sup>12</sup> *CVE*, 196, note 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Correspondance de Émile Zola*, Bard H. Bakker, ed. (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal/CNRS, 1978-1995). Subsequent references have the abbreviated form *Corr.* followed by volume number and page number(s).

<sup>14</sup> Barthes devotes an essay to Zola’s culture critique and his aesthetic in *Nana*, in “La Mangeuse d’hommes”, *ÆC* I, 587-90.

<sup>15</sup> Lucy O’Meara, *Roland Barthes at the Collège de France* (Liverpool UP, 2012), pp. 41-51, discusses Barthes’s engaged reaction to the populous audience at his lectures. His rejection of monological authority aims to create an open, fluid relation with the community of listeners, enabling them to “mix their own colours” (*CVE* 181).

<sup>16</sup> Letter of 21 April 1864 in *Lettres d’un enthousiaste: Lettres d’Émile Zola à son ami Antony Valabrègue*, Olympia Alberti, ed. (Aigues-Vives: HB Editions, 1997), 79. Subsequent references take the abbreviated form *Val.* followed by page number(s).

<sup>17</sup> Letter of 6 February 1865, *Val.*, 108-09.

<sup>18</sup> Barthes writes, “la visée d’une règle bien faite et bien tenue, c’est de rendre le temps transparent” (*CVE* 144).

<sup>19</sup> *ÆC* IV, 658-59.

<sup>20</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present article to explore the episodic erotic fantasy of Zola’s letters (voyeurism, transgression, adultery, secrecy), scenarios that disrupt, in ways pressured and pleasurable, the writer’s daily work practices.

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<sup>21</sup> Barthes explore writers' work routines in his final series of lectures *La Préparation du roman, I et II: Cours et séminaires au Collège de France*, Nathalie Léger ed., (Paris: Seuil / IMEC). See especially "Séance du 26 janvier 1980": "Casuistique de l'Égoïsme", 297-310.

<sup>22</sup> See Zola's letter of February 1876 to Piotr Boborykine (*Corr.*, II, 437-38).

<sup>23</sup> Barthes references here Abbé Faujas's room in *La Conquête de Plassans* (1874).

<sup>24</sup> Letter of 6 July 1864, *Val.*, 81.